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## Title:

**The future of gendered pasts: thoughts about emerging research into women's history in Australia as feminists globally confront attacks on and the regression of women's rights**

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## Abstract:

Similar to feminist historians around the globe, over the past few years I have watched on with alternating joy and horror as women's rights have been variously won and lost, and as campaigners across the globe take to the streets demanding that women's voices be heard. Transnational solidarity on issues like reproductive rights, evoked by the wearing of the green bandana for example, simultaneously serves to inflate and deflate. It epitomises connections across borders, while reminding us that the need to mobilise is both urgent and widespread. Thinking about the complex political and emotional terrain on which early twenty-first century feminisms operate prompted me to think about how our emerging scholars researching women's and gender history are doing in the face of the waxing and waning of feminisms and anti-feminisms, and the irrefutable knowledge that historic gains can be consistently attacked and eventually revoked around the world. In this 'viewpoint', I use the 2022 Mary Bennett Prize process (awarded for excellence in early career gender history in Australia) as a means for considering the present and future of feminist history in the face of flourishing anti-feminisms and feminisms.

## Keywords:

Feminist history, feminisms and anti-feminisms, Mary Bennett Prize, Australian gender history, Optimistic histories

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## Biography:

**Sharon Crozier-De Rosa** is Associate Professor in History in the School of Humanities and Social Inquiry, University of Wollongong. Her research combines histories of nationalist feminisms, emotions, violence, and memory cultures, in and across Ireland, Britain, Australia and the US. She is author of *Shame and the*

*Anti-Feminist Backlash* (Routledge, 2018), co-author with Vera Mackie of *Remembering Women's Activism* (Routledge, 2019), co-editor with Katie Barclay and Peter N. Stearns of *Sources for the History of Emotions* (Routledge, 2020). Her current project, 'Memory-Keepers: Women Activists' Strategies to Document Their History and Preserve Their Own Memory', was awarded a National Library of Australia Fellowship. She is Deputy Editor of *Women's History Review*, International Federation for Research in Women's History board member and editorial board member of the journal of the Australian Women's History Network, *Lilith. A Feminist History Journal*.

## **Article:**

### **A feminist historian watching the waxing and waning of women's rights**

I begin my thinking with the colour green, specifically green as the colour of bandanas or scarves worn by feminists agitating for reproductive rights globally.<sup>1</sup>

The most recent iteration of the green cloth was in rallies taking place across the United States in 2022 protesting the overturning of the historic *Roe v. Wade* judgment. In 1973, the US Supreme Court delivered its decision on *Roe v. Wade* which ruled that the US Constitution protects a pregnant woman's liberty to choose to have an abortion without excessive government restriction. This led to the repeal of many federal and state abortion laws. Since then, the ruling has come under ongoing attack by so-called 'pro-life' lobbyists, notably in the years 1988 to 1991, and now more recently in 2021 and 2022.<sup>2</sup> In June 2022, the Supreme Court announced its decision in the case of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*.<sup>3</sup> As feared, this removed the protection previously afforded to women who chose to undergo an abortion, and meant that individual states could legislate on abortion. Women immediately mobilised, with demonstrations taking place throughout the country. These built on angry rallies staged in the lead up to the decision, including 380 protest events in May 2022.<sup>4</sup>

US protesters were wearing green scarves in solidarity with feminists demanding abortion rights in countries across South America. In the late 2010s, the movement to decriminalise abortion, known as the 'Marea Verde' ('Green Wave'), was initiated in Argentina. The green bandanas protesters wore were adopted by activists in other South American countries. Some successes followed with abortion being decriminalised in Argentina and Colombia. The green scarf was then picked up by pro-abortion campaigners

beyond the continent, in places like Poland, for example. And, as we saw, in 2022, it was adopted in the US.<sup>5</sup>

Similar to feminist historians around the globe, over the past few years I have watched on with alternating joy and horror as women's rights have been variously won and lost, and as campaigners take to the streets, expressing international solidarity, demanding that women's voices be heard. It has been a roller-coaster ride. For example, the day before the 2016 election of the misogynistic Donald Trump as US president, I published an article in *The Conversation* entitled 'What's Gender Solidarity got to do with it? Woman Shaming and Hillary Clinton'.<sup>6</sup> While it didn't exactly forecast Clinton's defeat, it also didn't paint a rosy picture of feminist solidarity. The mobilisation of the contagious Women's Marches protesting Trump's election inspired me, while news of the movement's initial omission of women of colour dampened my enthusiasm.<sup>7</sup> Within two years, I experienced elation when news of the success of the 2018 referendum to overturn abortion bans back in Ireland reached me, an Irish migrant in Australia.<sup>8</sup> Surely, we would see no more senseless deaths, like that of Savita Halappanavar in 2012, due to archaic oppressive gendered laws.<sup>9</sup> Joy at successes rendered by the labours of those in Ireland and in the 'Green Wave' was displaced by despair prompted by the devastating overturning of the 1973 *Roe* judgment which had acted as inspiration for so many other reproductive rights movements.<sup>10</sup>

For me, the widespread prevalence of green in the 2010s and beyond was simultaneously inflating and deflating. While it symbolised feminist solidarity beyond borders, it also served as a reminder that the need for feminist activism in the face of the denial or erosion of women's rights was, and still is, sorely needed. Historians of feminism hardly need reminding of this. We are aware that, throughout history, the development of human rights has never been unilinear.<sup>11</sup> This is a complicated tale of progression and regression. The transnational deployment of green, however, also signalled another directional shift. In this case, it has been used to demonstrate a change in generally accepted understandings of the direction in which feminist knowledge flows. As some, including US sociologist Naomi Braine and journalist Clara Ferreira Marques, have pointed out, those in regions generally deemed 'behind' the US, like Ireland and Latin America, now have lessons for their US sisters. These include strategies around diversifying support

bases on which to build abortion campaigns and building solidarity-based feminist collectives that offer information and support on the subject of reproductive rights.<sup>12</sup>

### **The situation in Australia**

In Australia, campaigns to improve access to abortion continue. On 7 July 2022, the *Termination of Pregnancy Act 2021*, which was assented to by the South Australian state parliament on 11 March 2021, finally came into effect. While South Australia was the first Australian jurisdiction to legislate for the lawful medical termination of pregnancy in 1969, this 2021 Act was needed to make accessibility to abortion more equitable and to finally remove abortion from South Australia's criminal laws (Western Australia is now the only state that has not properly decriminalised abortion). The significance of the timing of this reform, in relation to reproductive rights reforms taking place globally, has not go unnoticed in Australia. For example, Human Rights Law Centre Associate Legal Director Adrienne Walters said that the Act followed in the wake of 'the devastating overturning of *Roe v Wade* by the US Supreme Court, which showed us that we must never stand still when it comes to promoting reproductive rights in Australia'.<sup>13</sup>

It is not as if feminists in Australia can afford to be complacent whatever the current state of reproductive rights legislation. In recent years, the country has been plagued by gendered controversies, including sexual assault in the workplace, and this allegedly includes the federal parliament, as well as continued unequal gender representation in politics and the professions.<sup>14</sup> Growing public recognition of the need to finally address gender issues (as well as climate change) arguably helped to dethrone the sitting Liberal-National coalition government in the May 2022 federal election.<sup>15</sup> Immediately following news of the election outcome, commentators reflected on the outgoing Liberal Party's failure to engage with, and represent the interests of, women. The Liberal prime minister's and the party's unempathetic response to allegations of sexual assault in parliament had not instilled confidence in anyone concerned about gender equality.<sup>16</sup>

The incoming Australian Labor Party government, on the other hand, pledged to transform the gendered nature of Australian politics. In his victory speech, the new prime minister, Anthony Albanese,

shone a spotlight on women. ‘Together’, he said, ‘we can make full and equal opportunity for women a national economic and social priority.’ He also acknowledged Australia’s next Indigenous Affairs minister, Linda Burney, who was present on the night. Burney was the first Indigenous woman to serve in the Australian House of Representatives, elected in July 2016, and in 2022 became the first Aboriginal woman to serve as the Minister for Indigenous Australians.<sup>17</sup> Numbering ten, Albanese’s cabinet has the largest cohort of women to have ever served in an Australian cabinet.<sup>18</sup> Change seems on the cards for Australia. Still, as we know, momentous obstacles to gender equality prevail. Numbered among these is the persistence of indifference in some quarters, and anti-feminist sentiment in others.

### **Our emerging feminist historians and the Mary Bennett Prize of 2022**

So, thinking about the state of feminist reform, nationally and internationally, led me to ponder the question: how are our emerging scholars in women’s and gender history doing in the face of irrefutable knowledge that historic gains can undergo continuous attack and then be revoked? Here, of course, I am thinking of access to reproductive rights which, while continuing to be fought for and won, are also subject to relentless attack and at constant threat of revocation.

My litmus test for trying to assess this, at least in relation to Australia, is the Mary Bennett Prize. Alongside my wonderful colleagues, Catherine Kevin and Samantha Owen, I recently chaired the 2022 Australian Women’s History Network’s (AWHN) Mary Bennett Prize committee, awarded biannually to an early career historian (ECR) for the best article or chapter in any field of women’s history. So overwhelming was the quality of the submissions that we were compelled to award two winners, and two commendations: Gleadhill and Heath (*Women’s History Review*) and Twigg (*Environment and History*), and Donaghy (*Social History of Science*) and Laing and Davies (*Women’s History Review*), respectively (full details below).

I’ve included the full citations here to give you a sense of the richness and diversity of this ECR research in women’s and gender history. You can also find these, and previous years’ winners, on the AWHN website.<sup>19</sup>

**Joint Prize recipients were:**

Emma Gleadhill and Ekaterina Heath, 'Giving women history: a history of Ekaterina Dashkova through her gifts to Catherine the Great and others', *Women's History Review*, Volume 31, Issue 3 (2022), 361-386.

**Citation:** This is a richly illustrated and deftly told story about a range of complex gendered relationships including friendly, courtly and intergenerational. It is impressive in scope, sophisticated in its interpretations and conceptual framing, and rigorously researched. Through innovatively applying anthropological theories of gift-giving to histories of powerful women, it illuminates the complex ways in which agency and influence operated in both political and intimate contexts. Interdisciplinary in approach, it makes new connections between art, science, politics and gender.

Karen Twigg, 'The Green Years: The Role of Abundant Water in Shaping Postwar Constructions of Rural Femininity', *Environment and History*, Volume 27, Number 2 (2021), 277-301.

**Citation:** This fascinating article applies a microhistory approach to an innovative blend of environmental, technological, scientific, regional and gender history to offer unique insight into rural women's experiences in postwar Australia. In compelling detail, and based on a sophisticated interpretation of oral histories, personal archives and press coverage, it argues that the plentiful rainfall of the 1950s produced a new discourse and atmosphere of vitality which enabled women to reimagine their place in regional society. Written with flair, it is evocative of optimistic times.

**The articles that were highly commended include:**

Kate Laing and Lucy Davies, 'Intersecting paths of the local and the international: Joyce Clague's activist journeys', *Women's History Review*, Volume 30, Issue 4 (2021), 574-593.

**Citation:** This powerful article pushes the boundaries of transnational and Indigenous mobility historiographies by analysing the domestic and international activism of a pioneering Indigenous woman. It contributes important new historical knowledge about transnational friendships among Indigenous women and the role of religion in the making of Aboriginal leaders.

Paige Donaghy, 'Miscarriage, False Conceptions, and Other Lumps: Women's Pregnancy Loss in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century England', *Social History of Medicine*, Volume 34, Issue 4 (2021), 1138–1160.

**Citation:** This excellent article showcases fascinating and sensitively interpreted research into pregnancy care and loss which enriches our historical understanding of how women made meanings of their bodies. Through rejecting the imposition of contemporary meaning on past bodies, it unsettles current moral and biological interpretations of the body, while also remaining attentive to the affective dimensions of loss.

Together this ECR research: pushed the boundaries of transnational and Indigenous mobility historiographies; explored a range of complex gendered relationships including friendly, courtly and intergenerational; adopted a unique and innovative blend of environmental, technological, scientific, regional and gender history to re-imagine regional women's experiences; and, unsettled current moral and biological interpretations of the body while contributing new historical knowledge about the affective dimensions of loss. And these were only the winning projects. Others submissions, that closely missed out, navigated seas of sources, weaving together a range of ethnicised and racialised histories to produce exciting new knowledge about how subjects in the past challenged existing and produced new paradigms for living out gendered lives.

How were our ECRs doing in the face of the waxing and waning of feminisms and anti-feminisms, feminist gains and losses, and irrefutable knowledge that historic gains can be consistently attacked and

eventually revoked? They were producing research and writing that was excellent, innovative, beautiful and provocative.

### **The future of feminism and feminist history**

What does this foray into ECR research excellence tell me about the future of feminism and feminist history?

It tells me that the urge to ensure the intergenerational transmission of feminist knowledge is still a passionate and urgent goal, whatever the dire state of the academic job market or conservative governments' often corrosive attitudes towards the value of the humanities.<sup>20</sup> This is important because without widespread knowledge of the immense struggles and the subsequent achievements of women in the past, societies may be less inclined to prioritise protecting against the erosion of those hard-fought gains. The importance of knowing and understanding women's history will, of course, come as no surprise to the readers of *Women's History Review*.

It also tells me that it is vital for those of us in positions of relative security in academia to seek ways of creating spaces within our profession to accommodate and support emerging intellectual talent, while fighting precarity and casualisation. We know that we can never be sure that the need for feminist activism will ever be over. As with the *Dobbs* ruling, and many more setbacks besides, the history of human rights is not a progressive one. We also know that to best ensure the success of current campaigns, activists need to be informed about and forewarned by the varied struggles, strategies and tactics of previous generations of feminists.<sup>21</sup> To maintain hope and enthusiasm, they also need to be inspired by their histories of success. For that reason—that of ensuring the intergenerational transmission of feminist knowledge—among others, we need to work to usher those who are creating exciting, innovative, versions and interpretations of gendered pasts into long-term academia.

This emphasis on hope is crucial. The previously mentioned Adrienne Walters was, of course, right to derive from setbacks, like the rolling back of reproductive rights, the determination to 'never stand still'.



Of course, she is right, and yet this knowledge exhausts the mind. So, this brings me back to the Mary Bennett Prize articles. While they function to inform us about gender history in a way that challenges us to confront our own preconceptions and ways of ‘seeing’ and ‘knowing’ the past, looking back over the submissions, I am also reminded of their other purposes. They serve to reinvigorate us, introducing us to new and sophisticated assemblages of theory, concept and content, and allowing us to see new connections in the making, such as those between art, science, nature, politics and gender. They can, as a number of the submissions did, compel us to revisit optimistic times, when futures were reimagined and presents were experienced as spaces of both possibility and contentedness.

For these reasons and more, there is a lot to be optimistic about when thinking about the future of feminisms and feminist histories.

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<sup>1</sup> Vera Mackie and I have recently written about the use of the colour green in feminist protests. See Vera Mackie and Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, ‘From South to North: Green and Transnational Solidarity’, *VIDA: Blog of the Australian Women's History Network*, August 9, 2022, [www.auswhn.org.au/blog/colour-green/](http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/colour-green/) (accessed August 9, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Marlene Gerber Fried, ‘Reproductive Rights Activism in the Post-Roe Era’, *American Journal of Public Health* 103, no. 1 (2013): 10-14.

<sup>3</sup> Joanne Rosen (interviewed by Saralyn Cruickshank), ‘Inside the “Dobbs” Decision: Health law and policy expert Joanne Rosen discusses the Supreme Court decision that overturned “Roe” and “Casey” and ushered in a new era of reproductive rights in the United States’, *The Hub*, Johns Hopkins University website, July 1, 2022, <https://hub.jhu.edu/2022/07/01/joanne-rosen-insight-dobbs-decision/> (accessed August 8, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> The demonstrations in anticipation of, and then sparked by, the *Dobbs* decision are discussed in detail in Vera Mackie and Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, ‘Rallying Feminists: Activism, Archives and Affect’, *Women's History Review*, published online July 11, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2022.2090711>.

<sup>5</sup> Frances Solá-Santiago, ‘What The Green Scarf Means In The Fight For Reproductive Rights’, *Refinery29*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2022/05/10978997/green-scarf-meaning-roe-v-wade-protests> (accessed June 10, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, ‘What’s Gender Solidarity got to do with it? Woman Shaming and Hillary Clinton’, *The Conversation*, November 8, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/whats-gender-solidarity-got-to-do-with-it-woman-shaming-and-hillary-clinton-68325> (accessed August 4, 2022). For more on Trump’s reputation for misogyny, see Suzanne Moore, ‘Why Did Women Vote for Trump? Because Misogyny is Not a Male-Only Attribute’, *The Guardian*, November 17, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/commentisfree/2016/nov/16/why-did-women-vote-for-trump-because-misogyny-is-not-amale-only-attribute> (accessed August 4, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> For more on this, see Mackie and Crozier-De Rosa, ‘Rallying Feminists’, 6-8.

<sup>8</sup> For a history of voting on abortion in Ireland, see Theresa Reidy, ‘Voting on Abortion Again and Again and Again: Campaign Efforts and Effects’, *Éire-Ireland* 35, Nos. 3-4 (2021): 21-50.

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<sup>9</sup> Emer O’Toole, ‘The midwife who told the truth in the Savita Halappanavar abortion case’, *The Guardian*, April 20, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/19/savita-halappanavar-abortion-midwife> (accessed August 3, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Amanda Taub, ‘Roe Inspired Activists Worldwide, Who May Be Rethinking Strategy’, *The New York Times*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/04/world/americas/abortion-activists-movements.html> (accessed August 3, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Ratna Kapur, ‘Human rights in the 21st century: take a walk on the dark side’, *The Sydney Law Review* 28 (2006): 665-687.

<sup>12</sup> Naomi Braine, ‘Pañuelos Verdes, Acompañamiento, Solidaridad: The Global South Has Much to Teach the North in This Moment’, in Natalie Adler et al, eds, *We Organize to Change Everything: Fighting for Abortion Access and Reproductive Justice*, (London: Verso Books, 2022), 35-36; and, Clara Ferreira ‘Marques, Ireland and Latin America Can Inspire the US Abortion Fight’, *Washington Post*, May 30, 2022, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/ireland-and-latin-america-can-inspire-the-us-abortion-fight/2022/05/30/500ffa4c-dfef-11ec-ae64-6b23e5155b62\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/ireland-and-latin-america-can-inspire-the-us-abortion-fight/2022/05/30/500ffa4c-dfef-11ec-ae64-6b23e5155b62_story.html) (accessed August 1, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Law Centre Media Release, ‘Abortion law finally comes into effect in South Australia’, Human Rights Law Centre website, July 7, 2022, <https://www.hrlc.org.au/news/2022/7/7/abortion-law-finally-comes-into-effect-in-south-australia> (accessed August 1, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Eden Gillespie, “‘Our country can do better’”: Grace Tame, Brittany Higgins slam inaction on sexual assault’, *SBS News*, February 9, 2022, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/our-country-can-do-better-grace-tame-brittany-higgins-slam-inaction-on-sexual-assault/11tclhi9a> (accessed August 4, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> The new Labor government acted quickly on the issue of climate change. At the time of writing, their legislation, ‘which would create a legally binding target for the first time in Australia to cut greenhouse emissions by 43 per cent by 2030’, had just passed the lower house and was soon expected to go to Senate. See Katina Curtis, Mike Foley and Angus Thompson, ‘Labor’s climate change bill passes lower house’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/labor-s-climate-change-bill-passes-lower-house-20220804-p5b759.html> (accessed August 4, 2022).

<sup>16</sup> Amanda Meade, ‘Senior Liberals say party must address women problem and regain centre after election loss’, *The Guardian*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/may/22/senior-liberals-say-party-must-address-women-problem-and-regain-centre-after-election-loss> (accessed May 22, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Also, in a dramatic departure from the lack of dedication exhibited by the previous government, in his election victory speech, Albanese pledged commitment to implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart which calls for the establishment of a First Nations Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Australian Constitution, as well as the establishment of a Makarrata Commission for the purpose of treaty making and truth-telling. See ‘Read incoming prime minister Anthony Albanese’s full speech after Labor wins federal election’, *ABC News*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-22/anthony-albanese-acceptance-speech-full-transcript/101088736> (accessed August 4, 2022). For more on Linda Burney see her website, <https://www.lindaburney.com.au/about-linda> (accessed August 7, 2022).

<sup>18</sup> RMIT ABC Fact Check, ‘Anthony Albanese says his cabinet has the largest number of women in history. Is that correct?’, *ABC News*, June 9, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-09/fact-check-are-there-more-women-in-cabinet-than-ever-before/101131582> (accessed August 1, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Australian Women’s History Network, Mary Bennett Prize, Australian Women’s History Network website, <http://www.auswhn.org.au/prizes/mary-bennett-prize/> (accessed August 6, 2022).

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion on precarity in academic employment in Australia, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this, see Nerida Spina, Kathleen Smithers, Jess Harris & Inger Mewburn, ‘Back to zero? Precarious employment in academia amongst “older” early career researchers, a life-course approach’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 43, no. 4 (2022): 534-549. For details about efforts to undermine the value of the humanities in Australia, see Joel Barnes, ‘Defunding arts degrees is the latest battle in a 40-year culture war’, *The Conversation*, July 3, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/defunding-arts-degrees-is-the-latest-battle-in-a-40-year-culture-war-141689> (accessed August 4, 2022).

<sup>21</sup> Some past activists have been articulate about the problems that exist when relying on stories of the past to inspire participation in a movement, especially if the stories they wanted to use were not well known or had fallen out of the history canon. See Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, ‘Anger, Resentment and the Limits of

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Historical Narratives in Protest Politics: The Case of Early Twentieth Century Irish Women’s Intersectional Movements’, *Emotions: History, Cultural, Society* 5 (2021): 68–86; and, Ana Stevenson, ‘From Suffragist to Congresswoman: Celebrating Political Action, Women’s History, and Feminist Intellectuals in *Ms. Magazine*, 1972–1984’, in *Suffrage at 100: Women in American Politics since 1920*, ed. Stacie Taranto and Leandra Zarnow (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 201–18.